

Charles Bissell House
666 East Avenue
Rochester
Monroe County
New York

HABS No. NY-5640

HABS
NY
28-ROCH.
14-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. NY-5640

CHARLES BISSELL HOUSE

NY,
28-ROCH,
14-

Location: 666 East Avenue, at the northeast corner of East Avenue at Upton Park, Rochester, Monroe County, New York

Present Owner and Occupant: Rochester Methodist Home

Present Use: Church home for the elderly

Statement of Significance: Built between 1852 and 1854, for Mr. and Mrs. Charles Perkins Bissell this Gothic Revival structure is attributed to Andrew Jackson Warner. The inspiration for the exterior treatment was undoubtedly from the publications of A. J. Downing, Cottage Residences; Or, A Series of Designs for Rural Cottages and Cottage Villas (1842) and The Architecture of Country Houses; Including Designs for Cottages, Farm Houses and Villas... (1850). The Bissell house was one of the earliest houses in a century-long shift of social Rochester from the old Third Ward to the East Avenue area. It is located within the City of Rochester's East Avenue Preservation District.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1852-54.
2. Architect: The structure is attributed to A. J. Warner, Rochester's leading architect.
3. Original and subsequent owners: "... Part of the northwest corner of town lot fifty-one in the second division of townships, township thirteen, in the town of Brighton, containing about five and a half acres of land..."

1852 Deed, May 17, 1852, Book 98, p. 309.
From: John Culver
To: Julia M. Bissell
For: \$57.00

- 1852 Deed, May 18, 1852, Book 103, p. 306.
From: Isabella Mulholland
To: Julia M. Bissell
For: \$3000.00
The deed is for an additional piece of property
in lot fifty-one.
- 1867 Deed, April 1, 1867, Book 210, p. 466.
From: Charles P. Bissell, by attorney
To: Charles E. Upton
For: \$10,500.00
- 1887 Deed, April 20, 1887, Book 357, p. 317.
From: Charles E. Upton
To: William J. Ashley
- 1887 Deed, April 20, 1887, Book 357, p. 318.
From: William J. Ashley
To: Louise R. Upton
- 1888 Deed, January 19, 1888, Book 428, p. 416.
From: Louise R. Upton by Henry Danforth, referee
To: Helen S. Wright
For: \$6,958.00
The property description is as follows: "...run-
ning one hundred and four feet on East Avenue
and back at equal width three hundred feet along
Upton Park..."
- 1889 Deed, December 17, 1889, Book 468, p. 55.
From: Charles E. Upton by assignee
To: Helen S. Wright
For: \$250.00
This property is described as the same piece as
Lots one and two in the Upton Tract.
- 1889 Deed, December 23, 1889, Book 468, p. ?
From: Anne B. Ashley
To: Helen S. Wright
For: \$700.00, quit claim
- 1891 Deed, June 6, 1891, Book 481, p. 160.
From: Burton Davy, as sheriff
To: Helen S. Wright
For: \$1000.00
This amount was paid as a result of a suit brought
against Upton, Ashley and others for failure to
make mortgage payments.

- 1910 Deed, June 15, 1910, Book 815, p. 164.
From: Helen S. Wright
To: Schuyler Colfax
" ... part of the described premises ..."
- 1927 Deed, May 6, 1927, Book 1415, p. 459.
From: Catherine N. Colfax, widow
To: Bettes Schuyler Colfax Townson, her daughter
- 1949 Deed, March 28, 1949, Book 2538, p. 490.
From: Bettes Schuyler Colfax Townson
To: Samuel W. Townsend and Wanda E. Townsend, his wife
- 1952 Deed, December 24, 1952, Book 2798, p. 9.
From: Samuel W. Townsend and Wanda E. Townsend, his wife
To: Rochester Methodist Home

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: C. P. Bissell's brother, Josiah, an engineer, architect, planner and speculator is supposed to have built the house from stone taken from the Holy Sepulchre Cemetery and the first Erie Canal Aqueduct.
5. Original plan and construction: The original plans were destroyed in the Granite Building fire.
6. Alterations and additions: When the Colfax family took possession in 1910, the house was enlarged, the back roof raised, and the whole rear was greatly changed. The original plans called for eight rooms. A sleeping porch was added to the rear west bedroom. Some servants rooms were added. The design of the west porch was changed to its present form. A porte-cochere was constructed to the east. This was demolished by a truck and has been replaced by a plainer entrance.

In 1926, further alterations were made. The double parlor on the west side of the first floor was opened into one room. The original fireplaces were removed and replaced by a new single fireplace. The pipe organ in the foyer was removed. A second floor bathroom was installed. Since the purchase by the Rochester Methodist Home, the service areas have been enlarged. The butler's pantry is as it was in 1926.

The additional kitchen space was obtained by eliminating the servants dining room, pantry and a passage way to

to the rear porch. All were originally off the north of the room. In 1955-56, a modern institutional addition designed by C. Storrs Barrows was made to the northwest.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected With the Structure:

Josiah Bissell, brother of Charles P. Bissell, is credited with changing the name of the street from East Main Street to East Avenue. He had approached the Common Council to officially change the name. Being unsuccessful, he and a friend took matters into their own hands, by hanging hand-painted "East Avenue" signs at every corner. Thus, the name was changed from East Main Street.

Julia Bissell was a woman of presumed independent means as she purchased other extensive property at the time of the purchase of 666 East Avenue.

The third owner, Schuyler Colfax, was the son of the Vice-President. He was associated with the Artura Photo Paper Company, Columbia, Ohio. When Eastman Kodak purchased the company, Colfax came to Rochester as sales manager.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Bibliography:

a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Deeds, Office of Monroe County Clerk.

Hubbell, Marguerite E. "A House That Is a Home."
Unpublished history by a resident of the Rochester Methodist Home, 1958.

b. Secondary and published sources:

McIntosh, W. H. History of Monroe County, New York.
Philadelphia: Everts, Ensign and Everts, 1876.

2. Likely sources not yet investigated: Photographic archives.

Prepared by Kevin Patrick Harrington
Society For the Pre-
servation of Land-
marks in Western New
York
December 2, 1966

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Gothic Revival character of the exterior of the original portion is in marked contrast to the probable 1926 interior alterations in the Colonial Revival style.
2. Condition of fabric: The house has received good institutional maintenance.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Fifty-eight feet by sixty-four feet; three bay facade; two-and-one-half stories; L-shaped plan with modern addition.
2. Foundations: The brownstone foundations are fitted with a slightly elevated water table.
3. Wall construction: The original portion of the house is finished with random ashlar brownstone. The rear wall is of red common brick. The rear addition of 1910 is finished with half-timbering set in a grid pattern.
4. Structural system, framing: The twelve-inch thick masonry walls are load bearing.
5. Chimneys: A banded and paneled brick chimney is located on the east slope of the west wing. Two red brick chimneys with stone caps are located on the east wing.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The original center south entrance is not used. A large Tudor arched glass door is flanked by casement windows. Six small Tudor arched windows are set above the east entrance which in c. 1910 provided access from the porte-cochere and is now used as the main entrance. It is fitted with a simple door. In the living room, two pairs of French doors provide access to wrought iron balconies to the north. French doors also provide access to the west porch.

- b. Windows and shutters: Most windows of the original structure are set with flat arched cut stone caps and stone sills. Pointed windows are set in the second floor to the east. A Gothic Revival pointed arched, double lancet window, set with a cut stone arched cap, is located to the south in the second floor of the east wing. A capped pointed window is located in the south gable of the west wing. Most windows are double hung. All south windows are fitted with beige louvred shutters. The large six part window at the stair landing in the north wall is fitted with pointed arched panels set with diamond leaded glass and stained glass inserts. The double hung windows in the north wing are grouped and framed by the half-timbering.
 7. Roof: The steeply pitched asphalt shingled gabled roofs are finished with open, overhanging eaves with attached metal gutters. Each wing has a separate roof which is connected to the south by the slope of an east-west gable. This roof is fitted with a gabled dormer. A gable frames the east entrance. There is a third floor gabled dormer to the west.
 8. Porches, stoops, bulkheads: The south, front porch is recessed between the two wings. A cement floor is finished with a low brownstone wall. Access can be gained from each side via steps. On the east, a projecting gabled porch roof is supported by square and molded corner posts. The gable is fitted with vertical half-timbering finished with a flat arched cornice. A large two bay projecting screened porch is located to the west. It is finished with a quarry tile floor.
- C. Description of Interior:
1. Floor plan: The south entrance provides access to the large central entrance and stair hall. The dining room is to the east and the living room to the west. A recessed east entrance provides access to an east-west corridor which terminates in the entrance hall. The kitchen is located in the north wing. The second floor is similarly arranged. The master bedroom and sitting room are in the west wing. Other bedrooms are located along a corridor in the east wing.
 2. Stairways: The open well, three run stairway on the north wall of the entrance hall is finished with three turned and tapered balusters per step and sawn scroll-

work step ends. A molded mahogany handrail and natural finished treads and risers are in contrast to the white woodwork. The second floor stair hall is finished with a projecting balcony to the north.

3. Flooring: There is oak flooring on the first and second floors of the original house. Strips are laid in a herringbone pattern on the first floor.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: All walls and ceilings are painted plaster. First floor rooms and master suite have wainscoting. Deep plaster architrave ceiling moldings are finished with egg and dart molding, dentils and a running Greek key motif in the frieze. Second floor rooms are finished with wood cornices and simple baseboards. The master suite sitting room is fitted with a deep plaster frieze of leaf and urn design.
5. Doorways and doors: French doors provide access from the entrance hall to living room. A molded pointed arched doorway frames the east door in the entrance hall. The master suite sitting room is fitted with similar doorways. There are four panel doors on the second floor, original section. There are two panel doors in the rear wing.
6. Special decorative features: There are floor-to-ceiling bookcases in the south corners of the living room. A drop ceiling above is supported by elaborately carved brackets. First floor fireplaces have marble surrounds framed by neo-classical carved wood details, fluted pilasters, colonnettes, and swags.
7. Hardware: None of note.
8. Mechanical equipment:
 - a. Heating: The central hot water heating system has radiators which are recessed in the thick interior walls.
 - b. Lighting: Contemporary.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces south, with entrance portico to the east.
2. Historic landscape design: The large lot is landscaped,

with many modern plantings of ornamental trees. The driveway is located to the east, with adjacent walk. Both are flanked at the street by similar brownstone pillars with gabled stone caps which frame triangular incised stone panels. Those of the drive are more massive and higher than those of the walk.

3. Outbuildings: A gambrel roof carriage house, probably dating from the enlargements of 1910, is located at the north end of the driveway. There are living quarters on the second floor.

Prepared by Nancy Robbins and
Amy Hecker
Society For the Pre-
servation of Land-
marks in Western New
York
January, 1968; March 1973

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This recording project of twenty-six selections of historical and architecturally significant Rochester structures was undertaken in 1966, by the Society for the Preservation of Landmarks in Western New York, Inc., Mrs. Patrick Harrington, Executive Director, in cooperation with the Historic American Buildings Survey, James C. Massey, Chief. The project was under the general direction of John Poppeliers, Senior Historian. Architectural and historical descriptions were contributed by the Society for the Preservation of Landmarks in Western New York, Inc. General photographic documentation was undertaken by Hans Padelt, Senior Engineer, Graflex, on a contractual basis with the Historic American Buildings Survey. The final documentation and editing was done by Susan R. Slade in 1978, for transmittal to the Library of Congress and the impending publication of the Historic American Buildings Survey New York State catalogue.